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Volume 23, 2015 - [Issue 3](#)

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Can ecotourism deliver real economic, social, and environmental benefits? A study of the Osa Peninsula, Costa Rica

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Pages 339-357 | Received 08 Apr 2013, Accepted 04 Sep 2014, Published online: 21 Oct 2014

Cite this article

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2014.965176>



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Abstract

Doubt persists about ecotourism's ability to make tangible contributions to conservation and deliver benefits for host communities. This work in Costa Rica's Osa Peninsula tests the hypothesis that ecotourism in this region is more effective at improving well-being for local residents, at enhancing their access to key resources and information, and at supporting biodiversity conservation than other locally available economic sectors. Data from 128 semi-structured interviews with local workers, both in ecotourism and in other occupations, together with associated research, indicate that ecotourism offers the best currently available employment opportunities, double the earnings of other livelihoods, and other linked benefits. Locally, ecotourism is viewed as the activity contributing most to improvements in residents' quality of life in the Osa Peninsula and to increased levels of financial and attitudinal support for parks and

environmental conservation. Ecolodge ownership by local people is substantial, and many local ecotourism workers plan to launch their own businesses. The data offer a convincing rebuttal to arguments that ecotourism does little to address poverty or disparities in access to resources and equally rebuts claims that ecotourism is simply a part of the “neoliberal conservation toolkit” that cannot help but exacerbate the very inequalities it purports to address.

Abstract

Ecotourism has become a popular form of tourism in Costa Rica, and its impact on local communities and the environment has been widely debated. This study explores the experiences of local residents and businesses in Puerto Jimenez and Drake Bay, Costa Rica, who are directly involved in the ecotourism industry. Through a series of interviews and focus groups, the study examines the economic, social, and environmental impacts of ecotourism on these communities. The findings reveal that while ecotourism has brought economic benefits and created employment opportunities, it has also led to increased pressure on natural resources and a loss of traditional cultural practices. The study concludes that sustainable ecotourism development requires a balance between economic growth, environmental conservation, and the preservation of local culture and traditions.

Keywords:

- ecotourism
- community development
- conservation
- tourism impacts
- Costa Rica
- Osa Peninsula

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Acknowledgements

This study was made possible through a grant from the Tinker Foundation. We are grateful to Fundacion Corcovado for their assistance throughout the complexities of fieldwork logistics. Our thanks go to the residents and businesses of Puerto Jimenez and Drake Bay who shared with us their invaluable knowledge and experience in countless interviews and conversations with our research teams. We are very grateful for the time they granted us, and for their patience and wisdom in sharing perspectives on their home. We also wish to acknowledge the efforts of our student research assistants: Stanford University students Caroline Adams, Molly Oshun, Joshua (Mac) Parish, and Anne Scalmanini, and Andrea Cordero Retana and Isabel Arias Sure of the Golfito branch of the University of Costa Rica.

All authors share an interest in the use of tourism to stimulate biodiversity conservation and alleviate poverty in Latin America.

Additional information

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Carter A. Hunt is an assistant professor of recreation, park and tourism management at the Pennsylvania State University. At the time of this research, he was a postdoctoral scholar in the Department of Anthropology at Stanford University.

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Laura Driscoll, MA, was the CREST Stanford Coordinator at the time of the research and is currently pursuing doctoral studies in the Department of Environmental Science, Policy, and Management at the University of California, Berkeley.

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Martha Honey, PhD, is the co-founder and co-director of the Center for Responsible Travel (CREST), and was an executive director of The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) from 2003 to 2006.

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